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STRANGE TALES
FROM HUMBLE LIFE,
BY JOHN ASHWORTH.

MY UNCLE;

OR,

JOHNNY'S BOX.



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NOTE TO THE SECOND SERIES.

THE reader may rest assured these narratives are substantially true, as many persons now living in the neighborhood can testify. The names mentioned are real names, both of persons and places. Some of them, as in the former case, have arisen from my connection with the Chapel for the Destitute.

I am surprised and thankful for the reception given to the first eleven Tales, now constituting the First Volume—nearly half a million of which have been sold in a few months—and the urgent request of many friends that I would furnish them with more, induces me again to dip into my diary, where many more yet remain.

I am a tradesman, and make no pretensions to literary ability. If He whom I desire to serve condescends to use me as a medium of good to others, my earnest wish will be realized. To Him my prayer has been, "HOLD THOU MY RIGHT HAND."

J. ASHWORTH.

Rochdale, 1866.

My Uncle; or, Johnny's Box.

One day during the last year, I received the following note:—

“Dear Sir: It is with a trembling heart that I ask to see you. I want to see you alone. I am in difficulties and trouble. Would you be my friend, please to send an answer by bearer, who is my son. I do hope you will have pity on me. _____”

“Tell your mother that I am in my office, and she may see me, if she comes soon,” I answered.

In a few minutes the woman made her appearance, but seemed so greatly excited, that, to give her time to recover herself, I turned to the desk, and resumed my work. After shedding a flood of tears, she became more calm, and then said:—

“I do not know that I have any right to bring you my troubles, but I am so miserable, that I am afraid I shall lose my reason, if I do not tell some one who can advise me what to do. Some twelve months since, I happened to say to a neighbor that I wished somebody would lend me half-a-crown, when she replied,—‘Take your Sunday gown to my Uncle’s, and you will soon get your half-crown.’”

“Who is your Uncle?” I asked.

“She began laughing at my ignorance, and told me that my ‘Uncle’ meant the pawn-shop, and offered to take the gown for me. I foolishly consented, and from that day to this, I have been in fear and trouble, for I have had nothing but ladeing and teeming, ladeing and teeming.”

“What do you mean by ladeing and teeming?” I asked.

“Why, borrowing to pay back what I had borrowed, and borrowing again to pay those I had borrowed from.”

“What have you in the pawnshop now?” I inquired.

“Well, sir, I have thirty shillings’ worth of my own and other folks’.”

“But you surely do not borrow your neighbors’ goods to take to the pawnshop, do you?”

“Yes; I have a neighbor’s shawl, and her husband’s coat. They want them for Sunday, and I have them along with my own things to loose every Saturday, and pawn them again on the Monday morning, to pay back the money I borrowed on the Saturday to loose them with. I receive thirty shillings when I take them, and pay thirty shillings and tenpence halfpenny when I fetch them back.”

“Then you are paying two pounds five and sixpence interest, yearly, for the loan of thirty shillings—nearly two hundred per cent. How do you raise the money? Does some one lend you the whole sum?”

“No. I get three shillings here, five shillings there, two shillings here, and two shillings somewhere else; and I am many times glad of a shilling to make up with. I cannot sleep on Friday

night for scheming how I must raise the money for the Saturday."

"Does your husband know about this?"

"No; but I am afraid he will find it out, though part of it has been done to keep him quiet. He is one of those sort of men that, however little wages he brings home, if I have not good meals for him, I get nought but abuse, or black looks. When the husband drinks, the wife has poor putting on. But if I once get out of the popshop, he shall live on potatoes and salt before I will go in again. For it is a low, disgraceful practice, and brings nought but trouble with it. I have borrowed, and borrowed, till I am ashamed to go out of doors. I sometimes pray that God will help me, but I cannot see how He can help people that go to popshops."

Believing that the woman had been thoughtlessly led into what she truly called a "disgraceful practice," and seeing that she was not yet hardened in the habit, but heartily sick of it, and had not lost all her self-respect; knowing, too, that she was trying to do right, and to appear respectable, she was put in the way of getting out of her troubles.

A few weeks previous to the visit of this woman, a friend came to ask if I could lend a poor neighbor nine shillings, to help her out of a difficulty.

“What is the difficulty?” I asked.

“I will go and tell her you are in, and she can inform you herself,” replied my friend.

In the evening, a stout, healthy-looking woman, with a bold-looking face, and a handkerchief on her head, entered my room, saying she was the person that wanted to borrow nine shillings.

“What do you want it for, Mrs.?”

“Well, I can hardly for shame to tell you, but I have a big fine lad yon, that does nought but cry every Sunday, because he cannot go to the school. I have had him crying three Sundays together, and I am frightened he will run away, as his sister Betty did.”

“What does he cry every Sunday about?”

“Why, he is very fond of the Sunday-school, and is really a fine lad, and a good lad; but I have had his Sunday clothes in the pawn for a month, and I want you to help me to get them out, for I know you are fond of Sunday-schools.”

“Why did his sister Betty, that you mentioned, run away from home?”

“Well, the truth is, she was as fond of the Sunday-school as he is, and took very good care of her things, and always liked to be decent like the other scholars; but one day I fastened her best frock, thinking I could get it out again before Sunday, but I could not; and when I saw

her washing herself, and getting ready for the school, I had no heart to tell her, but when she went to the box and could find nothing but her bonnet, she looked straight at me, and then burst out crying. I cried, too, but both of us crying could not get the frock out of pop without brass. That Sunday was a weary day."

"Did she leave home for that?"

"Not exactly. We got it out the week after, but I had to pawn it again; and when she found it out a second time, she cried, but did not say much. But when she fingered it, she bundled it up, and went to live with her grandmother, for she said she could not do without her Sunday-school. And yon lad is just like her; I am expecting he'll be off too."

"Well, Mrs., I am glad you have two such children, but I am deeply grieved with your conduct towards them. Thousands of children have been driven to desperation and ruin by such home treatment. But for the boy's sake, if you will raise part of the money, I will find you the remainder, so that he can have his clothes by Saturday."

When Johnny heard that his clothes were going to be liberated he was very glad. On the Saturday noon he came to his dinner, but found none. He looked at his mother, saying,—

"How is this, mother? Where is my dinner?"

“Nay, Johnny; I cannot both find thee a dinner and get thy clothes home, for it will take every farthing I have,” she replied.

“Well, never mind; I had rather be without dinner and have my clothes to go to the Sunday-school,” he answered. And away he went whistling to his work again, without dinner.

That night Johnny got some short, strong boards, and made a box. He then got a padlock, and after putting his clothes into the box, he made it fast, saying,—

“Now, mother, if you do pawn them again, you shall pawn the box, too.”

In the same month in which these two mothers paid me these visits, I had a third application, much more painful than either of them. A girl, about twelve years of age, with blushing countenance, came to say that her mother had sent her to ask me if I would get her clogs new bottomed, at the same time lifting up one of her feet to show me her bare toes. I gave her a note to the clogger, and I then asked her if she attended the Sunday-school. In a moment tears stood in her eyes, and holding the slip of paper I had given her in her hand, she looked up, with a face of innocent, deep distress, and replied,—

“I wanted you to ask me that, and I thought you would. But what do you think, Mr. Ash-

worth? My mother has pawned my little hat, my frock, and my shoes, and now all I have for Sunday is this ragged frock and these broken clogs. Oh, how I have cried every Sunday since. I used to be so glad when Sunday came; but now, I do not want it to come; for when I see other girls so nice, going to school, it makes me cry more, and I feel I would give anything if I was like them. And what do you think?—but you must not tell her that I have told you—my mother has actually pawned little brother Johnny's only breeches for sixpence, and he had to lie in bed two days, crying most of the time; and then she had to give sevenpence for them back, and Johnny was not for taking them off when he went to bed, for fear she would pawn them again when he was asleep."

I said nothing to the child about her mother, but sent my visitor to inquire, and everything was just as the child had described.

It is astonishing what a degrading influence the habit of pawning has on the minds of those who once begin. Self-respect, and the finer feelings of the soul are soon destroyed. Instead of practising economy, and trying to do without many foolish, and often hurtful indulgences, they run to the pawnbroker at every turn, sinking themselves deeper and deeper in poverty and sorrow. It is a well-known fact that about the time

of cheap trips, the three-balls have the most custom. Foolish finery, only fit for a few bright days in summer, often finds its way to the pawnshop. At one of these places there were over fifty white silk bonnets on its shelves at one time, besides a great number of light muslin dresses.

There are a number of travelling drapers, called "Scotchmen," who have had more to do in encouraging this objectionable custom than they will be willing to admit. I have seen these "Scotchmen" enter the homes of poor people, spread out the tempting finery, and, with all their eloquence, try to induce families to purchase, promising long credit, or to take payment in small amounts. Hundreds and thousands have been induced to buy beyond their means, and many such, when walking out, dressed in full feather, have called forth such observations as,—

"There she goes! 'Scotchmen' again! But popshop will come next."

One of these "Scotchmen" visited a village called Brookside, near Spotland, where he was trying to push his ribbons, shawls, gowns, &c., and succeeded beyond his expectation. He found long credit, or a-shilling-a-week, customers in almost every house, but when he returned in a fortnight to receive payment, he saw what he had not before noticed, that nearly all the doors

opened in a very primitive way ;—instead of by latches, they opened by pulling at a string, called a “sneck,” and when it was the “Scotchman’s” day, the snecks were all pulled in. He knocked repeatedly at some doors, and kicked at others, but all was silent. He went away, muttering, “The rogues have pulled in the snecks, but I will send them the bailiffs.”

“Scotchmen’s” packs and blazing drapers’ shop windows have sent thousands of weak-minded women to the pawnshop. Most of those women who pulled in the sneck had pawned their gown pieces ; for it is a fact that hundreds of new gown pieces are pawned to raise part of the money to pay for them, and scores of them are never redeemed, but pass into other hands.

One Sunday morning two of my neighbors were leaning against a flag-fence, smoking their short pipes, and in their dirty shirts. They were talking of home matters. One of them remarked to the other,—

“Our new neighbor has got a nice, smart wife, Philip ; have you seen her ?”

“Yes, George ; and she makes some of our wives look weary sluts, though her husband gets no more wages than we do.”

“And have you seen their children, how neat and clean they look ?”

“Yes; and I confess I am ashamed when I see them near mine, there is such a difference.”

“Do you think that woman ever goes to my ‘Uncle’s?’”

“Nay, there is nought of the popshop about yon family. You will see them all going to church directly; and church and chapel-going people have little to do with my ‘Uncle.’ But I think that question is rather too bad, George.”

George burst out laughing, for he knew that Philip’s wife was in the habit of going to her “Uncle’s.” This conversation took place near a row of dirty cottages, respecting a neighbor who had just come to reside amongst them. This new tenant had produced quite a sensation, and had become the subject of conversation among the women and children, as well as the men. When they went to reside in Long Row (as the block of buildings was called), every house was a miserable, wretched-looking dwelling;—few window-blinds, no curtains, no flower-pots, or anything that indicated taste or comfort; but there were plenty of broken windows, broken pots, dirty door-steps, dirty women, dirty children, and swilling-tubs. What business poor people have with swilling-tubs, I cannot tell. Mr. Fenton, of Bamford Hall, a man supposed to be worth two hundred thousand pounds, was once passing a row of cottages

belonging to him, and, seeing a swilling-tub, he lifted the top off, and, with his walking-stick, began stirring up the contents, consisting of pieces of currant-pudding, pie-crusts, tea-cakes, mutton-chops, and slices of bread. Calling out the woman who belonged to the tub, he asked her if all that had come out of her house.

"Yes, sir," was the reply, "I sell them to a neighbor for her pigs."

"Well," said Mr. Fenton, "there is more waste in that tub than there has been in my house these forty years. You are as sure to come to poverty as you are born."

The middle house in the Long Row, occupied by the new tenant, soon began to shame all the rest. The white window-blind, the neat muslin curtain, the couple of flower-pots, containing a geranium and fuschia, and the clean door-step, presented a wide contrast to their dingy-looking neighbors, and caused no small amount of gossip. If the door was left open, there was an excuse for passing by, to have a peep inside; for some contended it was all outside show; but they found that the inside corresponded with the out.

"There is a vast difference between some women and others in this row. I have five shillings a week more than the man who has come to live in the middle house, yet his cottage

is like a little palace, and mine is like a pig-cote. I wish I had such a wife."

The woman to whom this was spoken made no reply, for she had often been scolded by her husband for not being more tidy. But the example set by the middle house had done more to impress her than all the scolding she had received, and she was secretly making a new muslin curtain and window-blind, for she was determined that her house and children should soon be as smart as those of the new tenants. She gave up gossiping, and minded her own business ; and soon a second respectable-looking cottage appeared in the Long Row, and a second church-going family. After that another, and another, and in less than six months many of the dwellings became so altered that it was a question which looked the best. But still one retained its dingy and miserable appearance, the cottage where Philip resided, whose wife was in the habit of going to the pawnshop.

Philip was not one of the best of men, but, no doubt, his wife was partly the cause of it. She never tried to make his home comfortable. He complained that his wages melted away like snow ; he could never tell what she did with the money. He could admire the clean, neat, tidy wife of his neighbor, and was grieved to see his own wife such a *dossy*. She was one of

those women who think that after they get married it does not much matter how they appear ; trailing about all day long slip-shod, with hair uncombed, dress unfastened, and face unwashed, and altogether anything but lovely. But all such women make fatal mistakes. Men like to see their wives look pretty as when they courted them. This retains their affection, and strengthens their love ; but it is impossible for a man to love a slut, and I think sluts scarcely ever get a kiss.

A few weeks since, a grown-up boy was sent by his mother to request I would call and see them, for they were starving, and wanted help. I knew the boy and his mother. On entering the house I found everything even worse than I expected. The mother was gossiping in the next house, and the five children were huddled round the hearth, looking the picture of misery. All lived in one room, and slept in one wretched-looking bed ; there was only one small table, three chairs—not worth two shillings—no fender, and the house floor, and the children's faces, looked as if they had not been cleaned for a month.

“Where is your mother ?” I asked of the eldest girl, whom I took to be about twelve years of age.

“She is in some of the neighbor's houses ; I

will go and see if I can find her," replied the child .

While the sister was gone to seek her mother, I asked her little brother where the sweeping-brush was.

"We have none," he answered.

"Well, my lad, will you go next door and ask them if they will lend me a long brush. Now, mind, a long brush—not the hand-brush."

The little fellow stared and blushed, but did as I wished him, and soon returned with the long brush. I had just begun work when the girl returned with her mother.

"You see I am sweeping up these bits of straw and shavings, Mrs. Perhaps you will let your girl wash and scour the hearth-stone, will you?"

"We have no sand or stone," the girl replied.

"Well, take this penny and fetch a small stone and some sand; and you, my girl, will you wash your hands, arms, and face, and comb your hair, while your sister goes for the scouring stone?"

"We have no soap," replied the girl.

"No soap! then take this twopence, and get half a pound of soap, and then you and your two brothers and sister can all be washed. When were you washed last?"

"On Sunday," was the reply. It was now Friday.

While the washing and scouring was going on, and after I had done sweeping, I turned to the mother, a tall, stout, strong, and healthy woman, who was looking very sheepish, and said—

“Do your children go to any school, Mrs.?”

“No, none of them, for I have had to fasten all their decent things for bread,” she replied.

“You mean you have taken them to the pawnbroker?”

“Yes.”

“And is that all the bed you have for five?”

“Yes.”

“And where are the blankets? Have you pawned them?”

“Yes.”

The sand and stone were soon at work, and the four little brothers and sisters were soaping their hands, arms, and faces round the slop-stone, out of the porridge pan, for the elder sister had the mug to clean the hearth. How their faces were wiped, I must not tell, only that one of the boys wiped his on his mother's gown as she stood there.

After the washing, I requested them to comb their hair, and divide it neatly; but the eldest girl, who had done the hearth, and was now washing her face, said,—

“We have no comb.”

I took one out of my pocket, and lent it ; but though I often lend combs, I always refuse receiving them back. The change in the house, and especially amongst the shining faces, was marvellous. Turning to the mother, I asked how many things she had in pawn, and for how much ?

“I have both clothes and furniture in, and some of the tickets are sold.”

“Well, now, I will call to see you again in a few days, and if I find your house and you and your children clean,—for cleanliness is much cheaper than dirt,—I will buy you a new bed. Send the children to the infant school now, and I will pay for them. In fact, if you will do your best, I will be your friend.”

I did call again in about a week after, but everything was as bad and dirty as before. The children had only gone to the infant school two days, for the mother would not take the trouble to make them fit to go.

I left the house with a sad heart, for what hope was there for the poor innocent children,—their mother's ignorance and idleness were blasting all their prospects in life. When a woman begins to go to my “Uncle's,” it is a poor look-out, and it would be well if the children of such women had their Sunday clothes in JOHNNY'S BOX.

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BY JOHN ASHWORTH.

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